



SAFER SCHOOLS AND CAMPUSES **BEST PRACTICES CLEARINGHOUSE**

Lessons from the Field - Returning to School: Strategies for Supporting Staff

Wednesday, July 28, 2021 | 3:00 - 4:15 PM ET

Transcript

Tim Duffy:

Good afternoon and welcome everyone to today's Lessons from the Field webinar, Returning to School: Strategies for Supporting Staff. On behalf of the US Department of Education, we're pleased to have you join us today. In fact, some 1,500 people have registered for today's event. So additional people will certainly be joining us as we launch here at the beginning of the hour. Thanks to all of you who are already online with us. My name is Tim Duffy, I'm the training specialist at the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSLE, and I'm facilitating today's event. NCSSLE is funded by the office of safe and supportive schools within the office of elementary and secondary education. To learn more about NCSSLE and to access a range of resources that address school climate and conditions for learning, we encourage you to visit our website.

To give you a sense of what the website looks like and what is included there, here we share an image of our home page on the left along with some of our most popular products on the right. The link to the site is listed at the top of the screen and also will be posted in the chat for you by Daniel at this point. And please note that all the materials that you'll see today including the slides, reference, resources, bios of our speakers and the archived version of the recording will be available on the event webpage within our website. In fact, some items, including the slides and the bios are in fact already posted there. Please also note that you can access previously recorded Lessons From the Field sessions by visiting the webinars series webpage, which is also listed here in the tan box in the lower right and which Daniel will post into the chat box for your reference as well.

Before I introduce the first speaker, let's take just a moment to ask you a couple of questions via a poll. So first we wanted to get an idea about your role. So if you could select from among the options we offer here and select the most

appropriate for you. So we have school administrator, teacher, other school staff, local education agency staff, state educational agency staff, parent and community member. So which of those best represents your role. And then if you'll scroll, take grab the scroll function on the right side of that poll and go down, you'll see there's a second question. And we'd also like to know what form of instruction is currently planned for the opening of school in your community this fall in person, virtual, a hybrid structure. Or if it's unknown or if for some reason this is inappropriate or not applicable to you, you can choose the fourth option.

So, I'm going to give just another 30 seconds or so, so please weigh in letting us know the position you hold, what best represents your role, and what's happening in your community this fall so we get a sense of that for our presenters. And I noticed the response rate seems to be dropping. So I guess we can close the poll, let's take a look at the results. In the first instance, what is your role, state education agency staff wins that day with those of you who weighed in at 26% of respondents followed by other school staff at 20 and school administrators tied at 21%. So that's good to know. Someone or a number of people in all of those categories. And then probably no surprise to folks that the response to question two is overwhelmingly in-person instruction being anticipated this fall at 78%.

Great. Thank you for that, that's very helpful information for our presenters. So with that, let's take a look at the agenda for today. So after completing this introduction and we've completed logistics, we'll be kicking off today with updates on key information from the US Department of Education as you see noted in item two on the agenda. Followed by information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the school employee wellness guide and Worksite Health Scorecard as you see noted in item three. We'll then hear from the administration for children and families at the Department of Health and Human Services on support of Head Start staff specifically.

And following the overview from those speakers, we will have a panel discussion, which will include a field-based practitioner. The panel will explore strategies for supporting school staff members upon return to school this fall as we continue to contend with the varying realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. So with that, I would like to introduce you to the first speaker, Christian Rhodes. Christian is chief of staff at the office of elementary and secondary education at the US Department of Education. Christian will be introducing our other speakers here. And as he does that, please know again that these bios are archived on the event webpage listed on this slide and has been shared in the chat box. So with that, Christian, I turn it to you.

Christian Rhodes:

Hey, thanks so much, Tim. And thanks again to NCSSLE for all the great work you've done over the last several months as we've introduced this series into the educational landscape. Again, my name's Christian Rhodes, and it's an honor to be here discussing such an important topic. And really appreciate those who have joined us today, and many of who have joined us several times over the

last several months as we really embarked on creating a community of practice around lessons from practitioners, those who are on the front lines doing the work. And I'm thankful for our responsiveness to the topics and issues that have come up through chat and email. We're happy that we can bring together some of the best minds and experts in this space to really allow for a unique discussion around the best practices and also some of the challenges and opportunities that exist.

So, we're really delighted about today's webinar. We initially were thinking about this during May, and happy we're able to bring this to fruition today. Part of the work of the department is really to showcase what a effective practice looks like. And we're honored that Secretary Cardona has really charged us as a department to think about what's needed in the field and not so it just in our offices in Washington DC and across the country, but to really talk to and listen to those who are doing the work every day. So we're going to be addressing some of the front of mind issues that are in the field today and have over the last several weeks. The best practice is Clearinghouse, the address is in the chat box has been established through executive order from President Biden and really serves as a great resource for additional information for those who are day in and day out working to ensure that we have safe instruction for our students in the midst of COVID-19.

Through the Clearinghouse, the department has really looked to provide and has provided resources for community, schools, educators, and families as we work together to keep our schools open. And we're just thankful for all the submissions. We initially launched the Clearinghouse, and had over 1,100 submissions. And we're just thankful that the field has responded. So today we really are blessed to have some great experts from the Department of Education, the CDC, and the Office of Head Start. I'm interested in looking forward to hearing from our colleague from New Jersey who will be talking about what that work like on the ground.

One of the things I can say is that the changing landscape of the pandemic and the responsiveness of the administration and our leader at the state and local level is critically important that we have up-to-date information and that we act on that information as this pandemic evolves. So we're just thankful again for the opportunity. And I'm really honored that my colleague Loredana Valtierra is on from our policy shop here at the Department of ED. She has been a stalwart in ensuring that we're translating oftentimes very complex information for those practitioners in the field. So with that, I'll turn it over to Loredana?

Loredana Valtierra: Thanks, Christian. Well, good afternoon. I wanted to start off by expressing my gratitude to all of the educators and school staff on the call. In preparing for this today, I was thinking back on my first days of school as a teacher and thinking about how those first days of school were always ones of new hope and optimism for the new group of students you'd be receiving. And I can only imagine how showing up for in-person learning this year after the year and a half that you all have had might be feeling a little bit different. And since this is a

call about best practices on staff wellness to acknowledge the reality of how many of us are coming to this with so many personal experiences and grievances and trauma that we might still be holding on to.

And then not to mention the secondary trauma that comes with the job of watching your students go through so much. But the fact that you're here today only speaks so highly of you all because you are here to not only better yourselves but do that on behalf of your students, and so I wanted to express my gratitude in that. So I'm wanting to talk to you a little bit about some of our resources that we've been working on this year for you. And so the biggest is the ED COVID handbooks that we have a series of. And so in response to President Biden's executive order to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, the department released three volumes on reopening schools to provide best practices for state and local leaders as well as educators to prepare in reopening.

The first two are on K-12 education, and the first is focused on healthy and safe measures to implement CDC guidelines. And the second focuses on social-emotional health and the academic impacts on students. And so that's the one that I'll be concentrating on here. And so in designing and preparing this volume, we focused on ways that you could use your ARP funds and lifting up examples of what we've already seen schools and districts, what they are doing and what's working. And so we held focus groups, received submissions from nearly 100 organizations on what to contribute and what to uplift as examples. And so in this handbook, we have nine topics covered that fit into three major categories. And so the first was creating safe and healthy learning environments, which included meeting basic needs like school nutrition, setting a foundation of social and emotional and mental health and building safe and healthy school climates for all students.

And then the second is around addressing lost instructional time, which would include accelerated learning, tutoring, and expanded learning time, supporting equitable access to and effective use of technology and using data to help target resources and support. And then the last which we're talking about today is supporting educator and staff stability and wellbeing. And so that covers both stabilizing the workforce, ensuring that we aren't neglecting the pipeline but the retention of the educators as well. And to do so, we need to be supporting all educators and school staff including school leaders throughout. And so we're mindful that any one of these nine topics could have been in their own handbook. But since publication, the department has worked to ensure that any other resources that are coming our way such as the ones that are displayed on today's landing page have made it to the Best Practices Clearinghouse.

And that Clearinghouse is intentionally organized and aligned with the sections I just outlined. We have ongoing technical assistance, webinars like this one. We continue to hold round tables of students and educators. And we have been producing additional guidance on individual topics. Some of the ones we've already had come out have been on school ventilation, how to expand

community schools. And so you can expect others that are coming down the pike there'll be a little bit more on addressing lost instructional time and on student mental health needs. And so we are constantly working on behalf of you all to get you resources. And I think that's also part of supporting educator wellbeing as well. Within the educator and staff support section, we focus on a few overarching recommendations.

One is just that educators and school staff must take care of themselves first, and districts and schools need to provide the space and the time for them to do so that their work is sustainable. When I think of this, I think about what we get told when we're all on planes. And they tell us in the event of an emergency, if the mask drops down, you have to put it on yourself first before you're able to care for others. And so we very much approach it in the same manner. And then the second is around building intentional systems that support staff relationships and trust both between school leaders and educators and then peer to peer support systems. There's actually a really great example of this out of Montgomery County, Maryland in the Clearinghouse and how they've built leadership teams on different subjects within the school and how that strengthened their relationships and trust amongst each other.

And then lastly, just a rethinking around educator workload and schedules. That means rethinking about how your time is spent during the workday and during your work hours and then how your time is spent when you're not working. And so that means establishing and respecting boundaries so that you all are able to recover and actually continue to do your jobs as well as you are. But with that, I'll turn it back over to Christian.

Christian Rhodes: Thank you so much, Loredana. Thank you for just an extreme volume of work that I know is coming out of OPPD and the support that you're providing the entire department and the field itself. So now I think it's important that we hear from our experts from the CDC. And we're honored just to have a great partnership with them and have the entire pandemic, in particular during the Lessons From the Field series that we've created. So with that, I'll turn it to Jyotsna Blackwell with the CDC really to give some additional information and support on the best strategy, the best topics and strategies that we can give to schools and districts to support staff and educators.

Jyotsna Blackwell: Thank you, Christian. Thank you everyone. Hello again, my name is Jyotsna Blackwell. And I also want to thank all the educators for all the great work they've done over the couple of years, it's been tough. But I also want to thank NCSSLE for inviting me today. I'm a project officer with the Healthy School branch at CDC. And I partner with several states Department of Education agencies. And so I hear a lot what's going on in the field through them. And today I want to give a brief overview of some resources you can use to start developing or implementing a school employee wellness program or initiative. And I will do that by introducing our employee wellness guide that we have, our tip sheets, and our CDC works at Worksite Wellness Health Scorecard.

So why start an employee wellness initiative? Well, if you look at this slide here, chronic and mental health conditions, they represent a large 90% of our nation's 3.3 trillion annual health care expenditures. And one way we can mitigate this is by implementing interventions in the workplace like in schools. So as you can see in the slide, some of the interventions that would be beneficial would be to reduce absenteeism, increase workers' productivity, creativity, and retain top talent. I know there's a lot of folks that have been in the workplace for a long time. And so retaining them is really, really important. I know I hear from some of my state education agencies. When they talked to their superintendents, they said what keeps them up all night is retaining good staff. So it's really important to invest in employee wellbeing.

So many employees have health concerns that impact their work. This data is from 2018, so it was obviously before the pandemic. But if you look at this figure, 51% of teachers report feeling great stress at least several days a week. And since the pandemic, teachers' mental health has been affected by new instructional challenges and barriers to implementing COVID-19 prevention measures. So the CDC foundation in partnership with Deloitte Consulting and technical assistance from CDC launched the monitoring of school COVID-19 prevention strategy project to collection data on school prevention strategies and impacts of COVID-19 on the social, mental, and physical health of school communities. The data was collected from about 2,500 K to 12 teachers between February 24th and March 31st of 2021.

And you can see from the results on the slide that teachers report symptoms with clinical depression and anxiety and even leaving the profession. If you would like some more information on this study, there's a link on the bottom of this slide that you can refer to. So looking at the data, listening to teachers and staff, we all know the importance to keep our school staff healthy. So how do we get started is the question. So we have a school employee wellness guide that provides great starting point with lots of tips and resources. It was developed in collaboration with National Center for Chronic Disease directors in 2018.

And what they did was they convened an advisory board that included school and district staff, Alliance for Healthier Generation, American Federation for Teachers, CDC, Department of Health, the School Superintendent Association, and others to provide input. And this guide provides a suggested process and resources for building or expanding an effective employee wellness initiative. It is not intended to be prescriptive or provide a pre-packaged program for you. But the information is based on the experience of other school districts and experts in the field as well as research findings.

The guide has about eight main chapters. However, before you jump into the chapter, I would suggest not skipping over the quick start section. It gives you the why, who, and how, why start an employee program, who should use this guide, how to get started even with no or even low cost activities. So, in addition to the chapters that I've just mentioned, there are great appendices

and resources that complement each chapter. The resources also includes tools and templates. So if you're just starting out, it'll give you a basic work plan to work from. But if you've already started something in your district, then you can go to a more comprehensive work plan. And then chapters like chapter seven provides success stories from other states. So a lot of great resources.

And then like in appendix one, there is this list numerous ideas of activities, campaigns, policy changes on wellness topics such as physical activity, nutrition, substance use, social-emotional health. For example, the section on social-emotional health, there's a area on mindfulness resources or instituting a gratitude program. So there's a really great resources that you can find in this guide. So who should use this guide? It was written with very diverse readers in mind, people in a variety of positions. So really if you have the will, there's a way. Human resources directors, superintendents wellness coordinators, they play an important role. But if there's a willingness to start this type of program, anyone could use this guide and do it. So this guide was developed predominantly for public schools. But of course, most information will apply to all types of schools. So in summary, enhancing employee wellness improves staff performance, which can improve staff learning and behavior. Employee wellness initiative also contributes to a healthier school environment. And school staff who are engaged in improving their own wellness, more likely to model healthy behavior and promote student wellness activities.

This contributes to student health and in turn to student achievement. So again, I wanted to show you the employee wellness, where you can go get the guide. It's on our CDC Healthy School webpage. The other CDC school website, you can also find a tip sheet for promoting school employee wellness and how to get started. The site also includes a great video on the benefits of school wellness program, and it also refers to the guide that I just mentioned to you all. So if you want to get your hands on quick information to share with your leadership or colleagues, this tip sheet is great information. And again, this is also on our webpage.

The last tool I would like to talk about is a great tool to help you get started, and it's our CDC's Worksite Health Scorecard. The CDC Worksite Health Scorecard was released several times. The first version was in 2012 and then the latest version is 2019. And as you can see, the purpose of the scorecard is to do an organizational assessment and planning tool for Worksite Health Promotion, guidance on key evidence-based strategies to promote a healthy workforce. And it's also based on 18 modules and some 18 topic areas. And they range from organizational support to stress management to sleep and fatigue. So there's just a wide range of topic areas that the assessment is asking for. So again, if you would like to start a comprehensive program and you have not done really an assessment in your districts or in your school, I would suggest, that's my take to look at the CDC Worksite Health Scorecard.

And again, the link is listed below. So it is a great tool, especially if you're interested, again, like I said, developing a comprehensive employee wellness

initiative. This scorecard also identifies gaps and traps improvement over time. If you have not done a comprehensive assessment of your employees, again, this is a great start. With evidence-based comprehensive employee wellness initiative, we can reduce stress and substance use. We can improve nutrition and physical activity, and we can help employers lower their cholesterol and blood pressure. I hope you will use these resources to get started or take your program to another level. I just want to thank you for letting me present on our resources like the employee wellness guide, our tip sheets, and CDC Worksite Health Scorecard. And as I mentioned, they are on our CDC Healthy Schools webpage. And again, I appreciate all of you very much for all that you do, and thank you so much. Back to you, Christian.

Christian Rhodes: Well, thank you, loved the resources and the way you broke that down, really do appreciate it. And thank you again for the partnership with the CDC and the department. So now we're here to move to our next colleague from the Office of Head Start, Sangeeta who will talk a little bit about some of the strategies for supporting Head Start staff. As you may remember, we actually held a Lessons From the Field webinars series several weeks ago touching this early childhood component, recognizing the importance. I don't know if I'm right, correct me if I'm wrong, was one of our highest attended webinars series. So we're honored to have our colleague from the Office of Head Start, and I'll pass to you.

Sangeeta Parikshak: Thank you so much, Christian. It's an honor to be here with you all today. My name is Sangeeta Parikshak, I'm the behavioral health lead at the Office of Head Start, which is part of the administration for children and families. ACF has been a long time partner with Department of ED on several aspects of work in early childhood development and supporting young children and their families. And within HHS, ACF has an office of early childhood development that has been leading an inner-agency executive order work group on supporting the reopening and continued operation of early childhood education programs. The work group includes more than 20 staff with representation from more than a dozen offices across several federal departments. And the Office of Head Start is a key partner in this work, and I'm a member of the work group.

And the work group is working in several important areas, one of which is supporting the behavioral and mental health needs of children. And this is a very important issue for ACF and HHS. And I'm going to be sharing more about what the Office of Head Start is doing to support Head Start grantees as well as other early childhood providers particularly around staff wellness. Within the Office of Head Start. We have been working over the past month to think about how we can elevate staff wellness within our programs and help provide guidance to grantees around how to effectively incorporate both physical and mental wellness of staff into their programs. Head Start really strives to take a proactive approach when it comes to staff wellness. And one key way we have done this over the years is through the Head Start program performance standards.

And these regulations define standards and minimum requirements for all Head Start services. They apply to both Head Start and early Head Start programs. And the standards highlight wellness for staff in a couple of areas that I wanted to share with you. One is around how programs must support a program-wide culture that promotes children's mental health, social, and emotional wellbeing, and overall health. And this relates specifically to staff wellness and that child wellness is inextricably linked to adult wellness. If the adults in the child's life is not well and isn't able to take care of themselves or isn't supported by their work environment, then they're not going to be able to do the challenging and hard work that I know that you all do every day with children.

So, part of supporting a program-wide culture of wellness includes, I would say first and foremost, making sure that staff needs are met. The second area that I've highlighted for you is that programs must make mental health and wellness information available to staff regarding health issues that may affect their job performance and must provide staff with regularly scheduled opportunities to learn about mental health, wellness, and health education. And I would argue that this is a piece of addressing wellness overall that we have to give teachers and staff information about how to take care of themselves and then provide support necessary to meet their needs.

So, while these have been in our performance standards for a while and this is core the work we do in Head Start, it is hard often to find the time on the ground to address this or the funds to do so. So recently the Head Start program has received a total of two billion in additional funding to support staff, children and families during this time. And while we cannot tell programs what they should use their funds on, we are able to provide examples of activities that they can consider. And we've done this through webinars and different program instruction that you can find on our website, and I'll share with you in the remainder of the presentation. But we've provided guidance on ways to use funds on behavioral health and are elevating the discussion on staff wellness as a key priority, including one-time funds for infrastructure such as things such as break rooms. I know that at least one question, I was looking through the questions that were coming in prior to the webinar today. And one that came up was around how to use one-time funds effectively for behavioral health.

So, what I wanted to share with you here is some highlights from a program instruction that Office of Head Start released in early May 2021 talking about how grantees can use their American Rescue Plan funds to support Head Start employees' wellness and to provide mental health support. We've asked grantees to carefully plan to engage in activities that are one-time or temporary in nature but have a long-term impact. So here's a list of what we highlighted in our program instruction and the link to read it in its entirety is here as well at the bottom for you. I'm going to highlight a few things that are relevant to today's discussion. So first is around planning sessions for staff and professional learning and development for staff. So preparing for a return to in-person services starts by ensuring that everyone has the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to operate effectively. We feel that it's pretty basic.

And so, this is really important to staff wellness is feeling prepared and knowing what you will expect. And what will be expected of you is really crucial to wellness in any transition when you think about children as well as thinking about adults. The second area is specifically laid out around staff wellness and mental health support. We talk about conducting employee wellness surveys or engaging in other data collection. We think it's super helpful at the beginning to do that to understand the needs of your staff. And then increasing access to mental health consultation and therapy services for staff and instituting a staff wellness program. That includes activities such as mindfulness breaks, which you heard about in the last presentation, an opportunity for self-reflection.

As part of instituting a wellness program, we're telling grantees they can also invest in the physical space to support these efforts. So I mentioned break rooms earlier, but this could also mean purchasing equipment, supplies or materials to put in existing spaces. Just coffee machines or even a massage chair. It could also mean renovations to create space that was not there previously such as yoga or meditation room. We've also laid out some examples of hiring additional staff. We've heard feedback that staff have appreciated the smaller class sizes that we've experienced during the pandemic because many of our programs remained open for at least a hybrid of in-person services. So it's an option for programs to use their ARP funds to hire additional staff to reduce group size. This is something we're encouraging programs to think about to reduce staff stress and support the return to fully in-person services.

Other personnel costs include things like offering mental health days or time for mental health appointments, which is essentially sick leave. Return to work incentives such as childcare stipends or other bonuses. And then we've also laid out a section around vaccine support. So providing transportation assistance to vaccination sites, offering paid time off, sick leave or other paid leave for the time spent receiving vaccines and as staff members experience side effects post vaccination as well. So at the beginning of the presentation, I mentioned encouraging or promoting a culture of wellness throughout the program. And at the Office of Head Start, we're sending the message that addressing mental health, which includes social and emotional wellbeing of children and the adults who care for them is key to addressing COVID.

One way to send this message can be to place visuals throughout the building of the program or school to remind everyone of the importance of mental and physical wellness. This is an example of a poster developed by the National Center on Behavioral Health and Safety. And it's a national center funded by the Office of Head Start, Office of Childcare and Maternal Child Health Bureau at HRSA. And the link to the page with this poster is here as well as other mental health resources to support response and recovery during COVID. We also have other wellness posters with stress tips which can also be found on our website.

Another set of resources I wanted to share with you is the Head Start Heals Campaign. And what's really interesting about this campaign is it started right when we first started hearing about COVID. And it was initially just supposed to

be three webinars really focused on trauma-informed approaches. And then when we were done with the third webinar, we started receiving more requests for more tailored webinars related to COVID and trauma and staff wellness and child wellness and what to do during this time. We ended up doing 14 webinars over the course of the past year with over 90,000 views as of now. From the webinars, we developed a set of frequently asked questions, and I've highlighted the ones in red that may be useful for you. And the link is here on the slide as well.

Some things to highlight for you in the FAQ is we talk about the importance of validating staff members' feelings as they return to in-person services, highlighting that many are facing same stress, anxiety, and worries, and even exposure to trauma, families that they serve. Creating spaces and time to check in about staff needs while providing social connection and support and encouraging staff members to practice daily self-care and also helping them find the time to practice that daily self-care. Really helping staff to think about what it is that they may need as programs reopen such as finding childcare, transportation or even focusing on their own physical health needs. And then the final set of resources I wanted to share with you is the Head Start forward series. So this is a five-part webinars series, just finished the third one. And it explores the Office of Head Start's expectations for offering Head Start and early Head Start services in the new program year.

And we're prioritizing areas of immediate concern to programs, and we're going to revisit them as conditions change. But we just aired the webinar on mental health and staff wellness, I've provided the link here and you can watch it on demand. But in case you aren't able to tune in to the on-demand webinar or listen to the full thing. I wanted to highlight a few things that we talked about related to staff wellness here. We talk about in the webinar that research tells us that adult wellbeing is vital for child wellbeing. And it makes a lot of sense that the challenging job of working with children can be accomplished most effectively if they're well themselves. But making staff wellbeing a priority and doing so in a way that is easily incorporated into the day is much harder to accomplish.

So, on the next slide here, I've laid out a few areas of consideration that we've given to our grantees as they move toward full in-person services. We talk about making mental health everyone's business. If you're afraid to say the term mental health or recognize that mental health is key to wellness, then we're not going to go very far. So first and foremost, we need to make mental health everyone's business, understand that we're returning to a new normal, and with that comes a level of uncertainty and people could be feeling lots of things related stress. We talk about remembering the research, research that really talks about what happens if staff are not cared for in the program, if teachers are not cared for. If they're not able to take care of their own wellbeing, how it impacts not only themselves but also the work that they do and what they're able to accomplish during the day.

We talk about offering space to staff to share their experiences. Particularly as we're starting to go back into schools and into programs, really taking the time to understand what support that they need now to do their job effectively. And providing staff with clear expectations of what will be the same and what will be different as they continue or return to in-person services. This can help ease anxiety and promote a sense of safety and security. And finally, building time in the day to re-establish relationships. So really feeding and watering old and new relationships and engaging in social connectedness after a time of social isolation can improve the mental health and wellbeing of everyone in the school or program. And on the next couple of slides, I've just shared the resources that we shared during our webinars. So when you have the time, you have access to these slides, you can go through them. These resources can be used individually, during supervision, peer mentoring or coaching or in a whole group context like a staff meeting or a professional development meeting.

And I have another set of resources here for you. So you'll see here, I just wanted to highlight this. Sometimes people are like, "Why do you have this here?" We have tips about talking to Head Start families and staff about COVID vaccines. And we put this with staff wellness because in our research from polls we're taking and listening sessions that we're doing, we've heard from staff that one of their top sources of stress for them is their own personal safety and concerns about being around others who are unvaccinated and getting sick themselves. So we put this here because we believe that feeling confident and being able to have discussions with others about this topic as well as other sensitive topics is key to staff wellness.

Finally, on the last slide I wanted to highlight the Office of Head Start has a mental health and wellness COVID page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, the UCLKC. It includes universal messages for mental wellness and early childhood programs with resources embedded, including a section on ways to prioritize staff wellness. I hope that was useful for you all, thanks again for having me on today.

Christian Rhodes: Thank you so much. And thank you for the great amount of resources and amount of work that has gone in to just thinking about the best way to support those educators and others who are really working frontline. We should acknowledge that many of our colleagues have been working the entire summer, and we're just thankful again for their support. Now, we have the opportunity to hear directly from someone who's doing the work day in and day out. This is no offense to my colleagues, but I'm always interested to hear how we translate what guidance and information and resources are out there to what's happening day-to-day. I'm thankful to have Kathy McHugh from Delran Township Public Schools in New Jersey who's going to talk about some of the prompts and practices in the field. Kathy?

Kathy McHugh: Thank you so much, and it truly is an honor to be here. In returning to schools this fall, Delran schools have relied very heavily on our established structures for collaborative leadership to prepare for full day in-person instruction in

September. Our journey to build labor management collaborative leadership partnerships between administration and educators has grown and been fine-tuned with the support of New Jersey Public Schools Labor Management Collaborative. A state-level partnership that includes the New Jersey Education Association, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, and the New Jersey School Boards Association.

And this is all been born of and in response to important research that's been done by Dr. Saul Rubinstein who is a professor at Rutgers University labor management relations school. And he's now the director of the New Jersey Collaborative School Leadership Initiative. Very strong support from Dr. Brian Burchill our superintendent of schools and equally strong support from the leadership of our Delaware Education Association has really helped us to be part of a cohort of schools in New Jersey that's really leading the way in developing collaborative structures and systems that are designed to elevate teacher voice in shared decision-making and solutions-based problem solving.

Guided by significant principles of collaboration, this work really elevates teacher and staff voice in that decision making process whenever possible, and essentially really expands workplace democracy with representative voice from the frontline. We've prepared for the upcoming year by debriefing and examining a lot of the practices that were in play during the pandemic year. And we decided to really look at some key categories that included mental health and wellness, instructional pacing and delivering instructional technology decision-making and influencing outcomes along with operations health and safety.

And in our district, we brought together a large group of representative voices that included district administration, building administrators, teacher voice on the front line and our academic supervisors. Since our district leadership team and our school leadership teams in our structure are representative bodies, this helps to ensure that all important lenses that would impact teaching and learning are at the table to work on shared goals and to really create a shared vision for the upcoming year. Our debrief yielded actionable items in every category that we examined, and this will help and already is driving our planning, budgeting, professional development plans, communication plans, and community engagement and support for the coming year and beyond.

Our collaborative culture is really a system of doing business, so to speak. And it's helped to ensure mutual success of administrators and teachers, which ultimately supports student success. Teams meet on a regular basis and determine priority focus and engage in problem solving. We recently participated in a research study conducted jointly by Rutgers University and Cornell University which highlighted that our collaborative work at the district level reflects being at the national norm or above the national norm among 25 schools that are being studied nationally in seven key areas that impact climate and similarly impact student achievement. We were one of the only districts in

the nation to take this survey and impact the research following a pandemic year.

There are tangible benefits to collaborative structures and the culture within our district. Multiple lenses involved in solutions-based problem solving have helped us to ensure that programs, policies, and initiatives are truly responsive and nimble. And it has allowed us to look for ways to collaborate even when outside factors and parameters may impact decision-making. So even when the what of a policy or a program cannot be collaborative, we've made great effort to look at how we can collaborate on how. Helping to ensure that solutions and ideas that are generated are more authentic and informed, and they really meet the needs of our staff and truly support student success.

This is the way that we have found that we could really limit the collateral impact of decisions. So while we know that a lot of decisions are made with the best intent, having teacher voice and a teacher lens at the table for decision making and problem solving really has helped us to avoid some pitfalls that were unforeseen. And for us, the proof is in the data. Since establishing and committing to collaborative structures in a collaborative culture, we've realized notable gains, most notably student achievement in language, arts, and mathematics have increased in every student subgroup. Student attendance has increased, student conduct matters have decreased. Staff efficacy and peer collaboration has increased over the time that we've engaged in these collaborative structures. The research on staff voice and collaborative environments is impactful and inspiring. And in Delran, we really do feel like we're just scratching the surface of our potential. And the links on this slide really give you a little glimpse at some of the work that we've done in Delran along with the research of Dr. Rubinstein and our partnership with NJEA and the National Education Association. Back to you Christian.

Christian Rhodes:

No, thank you. I'm just so happy to hear the role collaboration plays and the supports needed for educators. It is not one individual groups or entities' responsibilities, it's all of ours collectively. So thank you for that. Now, we have a few minutes before we are scheduled to close and we thought it would be good use of our time to really open up for a panel discussion with several questions that have come to us through the registration. So we definitely thank all those who sent in their information ahead of time.

I think to start the panel, I'd like to introduce my colleague Neha Cramer from the CDC who many of you, if you've done any previous engagement with us have heard her even just recently as two weeks ago talking about the guidance from the CDC. But I think it's fair to say that as we start the next school year, we're seeing more outbreaks, the impact of the new Delta variant and the frustration with the rise of the pandemic continues. So key question is what can educators and staff do mentally to prepare for their return to school? And I think it's fair to ask what type of extra precautions might teachers, students, staff, and administration and parents expect?

Neha Kramer:

Thank you, Christian. And thank you all for having me on. Again, happy to be here as always. I think for this question in terms of teachers and staff, and parents of course can expect from CDC in terms of our recommendations, so on and so forth. So I do want to point out that we did update our guidance in early July. I think we released updated guidance on July 9th. And that guidance highlights our key prevention measures for this upcoming school year that we hope K through 12 schools implement. Most notably as I'm sure you all are aware now that CDC updated guidance yesterday for K through 12 schools with the recommendation for schools to require universal masking. And this is regardless of vaccination status and regardless of what the community transmission is at this time for K through 12 school settings.

We really want kids to be in school, we want kids, teachers, staff, parents, families to be safe. We want those children to be in school. And this recommendation is particularly critical since schools are serving children aged 12 and younger who are not yet eligible for the vaccine. Of course, the vaccine is, is what are our best defense for fighting this pandemic, especially as we're seeing a new variant spreading rapidly. And really to minimize our chances of having another future variant spread potentially the same way that Delta is or worse and in combating the Delta variant and any other circulating variant, we really stress for those who are eligible to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Some other key prevention strategies that we do recommend of course beyond vaccination, now we know that we're recommending universal masking is of course physical distancing to the extent possible. If physical distancing can't be maintained at those ideal spacings of three to six feet, so on and so forth, that's especially when masking is critical. As always, we want everybody to continue hand washing and respiratory etiquette regardless of COVID-19. The same for staying home when sick regardless if you're vaccinated. And in COVID times if you are showing symptoms, we want you all to get tested or at least seek advice from your healthcare professional or your doctor to see if you might need to get tested.

Of course, improved ventilation and cleaning and then contact tracing with quarantine and isolation. You'll notice in our updated guidance we highlight these eight, nine key prevention strategies that schools should really, really focus on and taking away some of those minor recommendations that we did have in our previous guidance like putting up physical barriers, so on and so forth. So that's the biggest difference that I think you'll see. And then just localities to monitor community transmission and vaccination rates and seeing if as more and more people hopefully get vaccinated that community transmission will decrease and hopefully we can shift recommendations to peel back some of those layers.

Christian Rhodes:

Thank you so much. And I'd like ask my colleague Sangeeta if she has any additional just reflections. From her lens of the early childhood space, what are some of the additional expectations that parents, students, educators can expect in your arena?

Sangeeta Parikshak: I can respond from just the idea of how to mentally prepare for their return to school. So I think it's super helpful to go after Neha because I think educating yourself on what the CDC guidelines are, understanding that they are being updated and they're changing based on the variant can help put you at ease to understand why it's happening and how this is going to actually protect you. Then there's other things that we're telling early childhood educators to do. Doing things like if you haven't been to the location of the program in a while, drive to the location, walk to the location, get yourself acclimated to what this is going to feel like and look like for you and remind yourself what is the same, what's going to be different? And also try to virtually connect with those that you haven't had an opportunity to connect with in a while. Those types of things can really mentally prepare you for returning to school. I know we have a short time, so that's what I'll say for now. Thank you, Christian.

Christian Rhodes: No, thank you. I think that recommendation ... As an early childhood parent, my son's going to pre-kindergarten. And we drove by last Saturday just to see the school and see ultimately the information and communication coming from them as to what mitigation steps they're taking. So thank you. As we move to the next question, what kinds of systems can schools and districts build to support staff relations and trust among all staff and between leaders? I would love to hear, Kathy, your just reflection from a labor relations perspective. You mentioned collaboration with many of the association and bargaining units. But I would love to hear a little bit more from you on just what are some of those systems that you can build to build some staff relationship and trust?

Kathy McHugh: Well, obviously anytime you can be inclusive of all of the voices that would be impacted by a new program, by a new policy would be very important. And two things have been particularly important to us inside of this work. One is transparent communication. And that basically means what the genesis for change would be and what role labor plays in the decision. Is it a shared decision? Are you looking for just input from labor with relationship to a decision that's on the table and going to be made? And then kind of closing up that loop. So I think a lot of times trust is built with that layer of transparency and solid communication.

In our district, information was one of the most important things to our staff. And so we set up town hall meetings that were accessible to staff only with administrators, with technology professionals within the district. And teachers could attend, it was a virtual meeting because that face-to-face connection was important to us. So that's super important heading back into the year, there are a lot of unknowns for staff. And I think just explaining the rationale. We did set up new emails that are specifically related to re-entry. As staff, we threw a lot of the information that comes their way at the start of the school. If something is related to coronavirus or related to our reopening plan, it comes now from a specific email address, which makes it easier to identify people who are looking for information or want to revisit information.

Christian Rhodes: Thank you. I love to invite my colleagues Jyotsna and Loredana just to talk a little bit more about your perspectives in this space as well around how do we build trust and some systems in place for our educators during this time?

Jyotsna Blackwell: I echo what Kathy just said, building a communication system, just informing staff on the new guidance. I think that will help elevate a lot of anxiety. But the other thing, in my presentation I talked about maybe if leadership would take action right away in the beginning of the school year by supporting an employee wellness initiative. When you see that the leadership is saying, "You know what, I care about you, and I'm going to do something about it, I'm going to take action." I mean, that speaks volumes. I don't want to say actions speaks louder than words, but in this case, yes. A leadership taking that role, building a system where employee wellness is not a program but it's part of an infrastructure is very critical. So I think that's really important.

Christian Rhodes: Loredana?

Loredana Valtierra: Just building off of what was said about showing intentionality around you I care about you. I think one way to do that is actually to build a focus on adult wellness and their sustainability into educator development plans. And so that is a rapport between school leaders and their educators. But for you to have some kind of accountability in a professional manner that the expectation is what are you actually going to be doing to care for yourself? And so to have that back and forth and that feedback throughout. We have also seen and heard from schools who had mirrored the circle times that students do or that teachers have provided in classroom spaces for their students to share with each other. And that some school leaders have done so on a weekly basis so that staff can support each other.

Not only that but encouraging district staff and school leaders to support educator-initiated affinity groups. And so we've heard a lot from teachers of color during this time, and beginning teachers as well, especially those who are just starting out their first year during the pandemic to have those intentional spaces with others who would be going through similar experiences for districts to really support those initiatives. But I think it's important to start as was said earlier with a staff survey and just to have a pulse of where your staff is. I don't think that anyone is thinking that school leaders have to check in one-on-one with everyone every single day, that's not practicable. But to build in some kind of a system where you pop into your teacher's classrooms, leave a positive note on what is going on in the classroom can really help with building trust.

Christian Rhodes: Thank you. And I think listening, around the communication, the role that we play as a collective unit around building those systems, it's important to be intentional and to make time for it on the front end and not as an afterthought, so thank you. Loredana, you just went off screen. But my next one, come see you too as we think a little bit about how can schools and districts provide educators space and time for self-care once the school year begins? This is a critical question that I know a number may have some thoughts on that. I'd love

to start with you and then maybe get my colleague Sangeeta to talk a little bit more about it as well.

Loredana Valtierra: Yeah. So a physical space that is quiet for school staff to recharge but where you can also still practice social distancing is something that we have also heard. Some schools have started to incorporate a quiet place and a calming place for teachers to pop into during their planning periods in the middle of the day when things are very hectic. As well, I'd say providing that space through professional development. Many schools, if they don't have one already have taken up a social-emotional learning initiative throughout their schools. And we've heard from those who are just starting them during the pandemic how much that actually helped the staff and educators themselves while they were learning about the social emotional learning that they would be working in and developing with their students that encouraged them and motivated them to work on their own social-emotional growth.

And so, we heard from Stratford County in Connecticut that once they had established this in professional development something they thought was just going to be for their students turned into school teams on social-emotional growth focused on the adults. And so there are many ways that can just naturally grow out of the professional development that you might be receiving for your students.

Christian Rhodes: Thank you. Sangeeta, any additional thoughts there as well?

Sangeeta Parikshak: Yeah. One of the things that I was thinking is it was just really important to assess what the need is. I mentioned this in my presentation. But we don't want to assume that we know what staff self-care is going to necessarily look like. We can give them a list of strategies, but what is it that they particularly need when they're coming in the door? So I think that that can be really useful. And then another piece is just around how much giving permission to your staff to take breaks and to take time for themselves goes a long way to that cultural wellness that I was talking about. In the early childhood space, you have those teachers staff ratio, so you often have two people in the room.

We've heard in programs about establishing a safe word. So if one teacher is all of a sudden feeling overwhelmed came out of nowhere, there's a safe word they can tell their colleagues so that they can remove themselves, go to that space that Loredana was talking about that is reserved for them to take the time that they need even for a couple of minutes to do some mindfulness relaxation strategies. Maybe there's some posters, that kind of thing that I was talking about earlier in the room to remind you of how to do your deep breathing, how to do those mindfulness strategies. And then you can go back. I mean, there's one minute, two minutes, three minutes, and then you can go back to what is it that you were doing can go a long way.

Another couple of examples that I've heard from programs recently is having a coping station for staff. So you have it for children, but having one for staff. So

having bubbles, you do bubble breathing to relax. Having padding to hold in their hands. So if they're feeling overwhelmed, they can do that while they're teaching, they can hold it in one hand. So there's different strategies and ways, and it doesn't have to be a huge chunk of the day. I think that that's one of the clear messages that we're trying to send, we know you don't have a lot of time, but there needs to be key strategies that you do, and you need to feel supported to do them.

Christian Rhodes: Well, thank you so much. And I know that we're really up against time, but I want to close out Kathy with a final question for you. And if you can do this quickly, I know we have a couple of things that we want to do as we close out. But I think it's important to just think about as we're talking about educator workload and schedules and hearing some of the work that you're doing in New Jersey. What are some good examples of what schools and districts can do to rethink educator workload schedules during this time?

Kathy McHugh: Well, one of the things that's been particularly important to us is really looking at prioritizing the learning standards that we're visiting. So a lot of our curriculums are embedded with a lot of material, and we really focused on identifying the priority standards that are the building blocks for the next grade level and making sure that we're focusing on those first. That's allowed us to really use some instructional technology to build in spaces for teachers to have a little bit of downtime to look at ways to remediate student gaps. That's been an important thing for us. Also redeploying other support professionals within the building to take some responsibilities off of the teacher's plate. Everybody has a lot on their plate, but there are times when guidance counselors or school nurses may be able to come in and support to give teachers more time to actually meet with a colleague, meet with a peer or engaged in some wellness activities that are needed. So those are important things that we've done in our school district this year.

Christian Rhodes: Thank you so much. Thanks for recognizing the role that I think everyone in the building plays in supporting each other. So with that, I want to thank our panelists. Thanks so much for your engagement. Honestly, thank you for sharing what I think is a really critical and important topic. If we can pass back to Tim, I would love to get some closing comments. And thank you again for all those that have participated today.

Tim Duffy: Thanks Christian. Great work everybody. Really important information shared today. I'm happy to report to all of you that we have a number more of Lessons From the Field sessions on the way during the next couple of months. So I want to share that information with you now so you can see where we're headed and what kinds of information will be presented in the coming months, August and September. So as you prepare for reentering school this next academic year, you'll see that next month we have a two-part session on re-engaging students. And that will include a focus on supporting special student populations during one of those events. So that'll be August 11th and August 25th. And then in September, we'll focus on early childhood realities in the September 8th

session. So a bit more focused on that earliest of our students. And then on nutrition and wellness on the 22nd of September.

So, we welcome your input on precisely what would be helpful to be learned during those sessions. The way you can do that is by participating in the feedback form. There's a link on screen now for you and also will be posted in the chat by Daniel. And so if you'll follow that link and spend a few minutes as we conclude here today, you can give us information, feedback, excuse me, on today's event, which would be helpful. And also though you can give us ideas about if there are particular pieces of content that you would like us to seek out as we prepare for those closing events this year. I also again just want to encourage you to visit the NCSSLE website where today's presentation will be posted. And you can listen to an archived version of this and previous sessions along with the slides and resources that have been referenced.

So that link is on screen for you now, the middle link there as well as the best practices Clearinghouse. So please use all of these sources of support for you as you move forward to the next year. I want to thank our presenters for the information today, and in particular all of you who have participated. We are some 750 strong at the peak that I saw. So really appreciate your being here listening in and offering such important questions and information in the Q&A box. Again, we greatly appreciate your time today. Thank you for all you do to provide students and staff with safe, supportive learning environments. Hope to see you again on August 11th for our next webinar. Have a great afternoon.